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FAMOUS WATER-COLOUR PAINTERS

IV.—RICHARD PARKES BONINGTON

INTRODUCTION BY

G. S. SANDILANDS

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Parkes Bonington; introd. by G. S. Sandilands (Famous water-colour painters. 4) Lond. "The Studio"; 1929. 6p. illus. N. Y. Rudge, 1929. 6p. illus. 30x24½cm. $2.25.

Contains eight reproductions in color from the works of the English artist's exquisite water color paintings, and a biographical introduction.

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Famous Water-Colour Painters

I. FRANK BRANGWYN, R.A.
II. W. RUSSELL FLINT, A.R.A.
III. J. M. W. TURNER, R.A.
IV. RICHARD PARKES BONINGTON

In Preparation

V. PETER DE WINT (Ready 7th June)

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EVERY important circumstance of Bonington's life is reflected in some way or other in the works, especially in the water-colours, he produced. In subject and in style, in development and in tendency there can be traced the influence of certain facts.

Richard Parkes Bonington was born on October 25, 1801, at the village of Arnold, Nottingham. As both his grandfather and his father had been governors of Nottingham gaol, the Boningtons might be considered as fairly well established people. So, indeed, they would have been if the father of the future artist had not lost his exalted position owing to "imprudence." When we learn, however, that Bonington Senior afterwards became a teacher of art and was successful in being twice hung at the Royal Academy, once with a landscape and once with a portrait, we are inclined to forgive the faults attributed to him—about which, by the way, there is very little tangible evidence; for his son Richard showed himself something of a painting prodigy and probably received much encouragement and some direction from an otherwise irresponsible parent. Richard began to draw when he was only three years of age and he could draw, not merely with reasonable accuracy but with some taste, when he was only seven or eight.

The subject of our study was born at an interesting time in the development of the art of water-colour painting. Girtin had but recently died and Turner was doing his best work when Bonington came into the world. It is not unlikely, therefore, that the elder Bonington, and perhaps Richard also, was familiar with the work of these two artists; and when the Boningtons moved to Calais, where the father set up a short-lived bobbin-lace factory, the boy's training was undertaken by Louis Francia who had been a friend and follower of Girtin. Bonington had thus quite a sound training before he left the sea-side that he loved so well for the more exciting atmosphere of Paris.

In the French capital, in contrast with the state of affairs in England, water-colour painting was at this time at a low ebb. Architects countenanced an occasional wash to give a touch of romance to their plans.

It is not surprising to learn, therefore, that the sight of Bonington in the Louvre, the youngest student on record, copying Flemish masterpieces, interested another artist of almost the same age, Eugène Delacroix. A friendship sprang up between them.

The Englishman appeared to learn something about the commercial side of art about this time—probably from his vigorous-minded, Gallic friend—for he soon began to sell water-colours which he managed to get exhibited in the shop-windows of M. Schroth and Madame Halin.

For a little while Bonington became a pupil at the Institute, and he

was also for a time (1820) a pupil in the atelier of Baron Gros, which was in the court of the Institute. The academic training offered by Gros, however, did not appeal to him. Young as he was, he knew he was already something of a master, and the Baron recognising this is said to have embraced Bonington one day before all his fellow-pupils and told him to leave the studio at once and *marcher seul* into his own personal fame.

The young Englishman must have known and loved the quarter where he studied so much, for one of his most brilliantly executed water-colours, *The Quais and Institut, Paris* [PLATE I], has this familiar scene for a subject. The position from which this drawing was made must have been very carefully chosen. The dome of the *Institut* is seen to full advantage through a gap between two buildings, the deep shadow giving a feeling of strength to the structure. The great cumulous clouds in the background harmonise with the hearty dignity of the dome and building, from which structures the eye is led quite naturally over the roof-tops in the foreground to the lower buildings in the Ile de la Cité beyond, where we recognise the blue-gray towers of the Conciergerie.

Further work in the Louvre and a trip to Normandy fall to be recorded. Rouen seems to have made a special appeal to him. He had a great love for the airy lightness of the Gothic architecture of which the city had so many examples. Rarely, indeed, can circumstances of chance, disposition and training have combined to produce in a young artist such an exquisite Gothic touch. His pencil drawings made in Rouen, Bruges and later on in Venice, have all the clean authenticity of a master. His early drawing of *Cathedrale de Notre Dame: Rouen* [PLATE II], gives little hint of his wonderful pencil studies of various details of the Cathedral. In this somewhat broadly treated work he was happy in uniting two different subjects—shipping and architecture—in one closely knit composition. The contrast between the mouldering sense of decay in the human habitations and the splendid serenity of the soaring spire has been made in an apparently effortless way; and, if the vessels and houses are somewhat crowded, the dignified isolation of the cathedral, emphasised by the long blue rift in the cloudscape, is more naturally stressed.

Notwithstanding the fact that Bonington very early indulged his fondness for travel by visiting various parts of Provence and Normandy, it was in Paris that he did his most important work. There, in order to avoid the inquisitive gaze of passers-by, he would often work at his sketching for many hours at a time from the inside of a cab. In Paris, too, his success as a lithographer was speedily established and besides making many excellent works of his own in this medium he is also known to have drawn on stone the designs of other people.

His colour sense developed rapidly, but he knew the value of draughtsmanship, and it says much for Bonington's love of colour that he could make very many pencil drawings of rare sensitiveness and then sacrifice them—public recognition that this particular accomplishment would have gained for him by producing from them water-colours in such a broad manner that they gave not the slightest indication of the meticulous studies that formed their basis. Many of Bonington's water-colours remind one of those cities which, when excavated, reveal still more ancient cities beneath them. Delacroix would often watch him at work and wonder what strangely elusive beauty his friend was seeking as, time and again, one lyrical aspect of nature was replaced by another more sparkling than before, the last interpretation being always the inevitable result and never the accidental accomplishment of Bonington's certitude of purpose.

At the age of twenty-one came the beginnings of real recognition. For the first time in his life Bonington exhibited at the Salon and there he scored a definite success. His pictures were two water-colours—one a *View at Lillebonne* and the other a *View of Havre*—both of which have since disappeared. The drawings were acquired by the *Société des Amis des Arts* at a premium of 430 francs. The actual cash was probably of little importance to Bonington at this time, for he was selling his drawings quite well, but, being a shy, modest young fellow much addicted to underestimating his own abilities, he must have greatly cherished the recognition of a body of genuine connoisseurs.

Two years after this Bonington was one of a group of three Englishmen who made history: the others were Constable and Copley Fielding. It was Constable's *Hay Wain* that caused the biggest sensation. Bought by a French collector, it was shown in the Salon of 1824 and scored a tremendous success. Such was the purity and brilliance of Constable's colour in an otherwise brown age, that Bonington's friend Delacroix asked for leave to retouch his *Massacre of Scio* which was in the same exhibition.

The incident must have created a singularly profound effect on Bonington. Represented by a water-colour *Vue d'Abbeville* and four oils, he received a gold medal along with the two other Englishmen. There is no doubt at all that the work of these three painters in the Salon of 1824—although Bonington's share in the great triumph was overshadowed by the might of Constable—revolutionised landscape art in France. Yet two years later the young man's very existence was still a matter of doubt to a reputable critic in England!

At this time among his own circle in Paris, Bonington's stock was steadily mounting. Delacroix, now the recognised leader of the romantic movement in France, said to him: "You are king in your

own domain and Raphael could not do what you have done." Soon afterwards along with Delacroix, whose large salon picture had stirred up in the heart of Bonington his latent ambition to be a great historical painter, he paid a visit to England. Their object was a romantic one—to study the unrivalled collection of armour belonging to a Mr. Meyrick. There are also hints of the tragic end of a Bonington love-affair and of a secret visit to a grave in Nottingham.

From now onwards Bonington found himself quite overwhelmed with commissions. There was scarcely a moment of his waking life when he was not thinking of art in one aspect or another. For the *Voyages Pittoresques dans l'ancien Paris* and other art publications he had been making many drawings. Even during his holiday in England he could not rest. Some of his most interesting and illuminating water-colours date from this trip. *The Pool, London* is one of these. In this the composition is so arranged that the sails and the yard-arms of the vessels in the river lead the eye around the picture. As an observer of the general make-up of a ship he was most accurate. Indeed, a well-known Bonington authority has emphatically stated that water-colours of shipping reputed to be by this artist can be safely regarded as spurious if any technical inaccuracy can be found.

A little farther up the river in *Cheyne Walk* [PLATE III] the painter rejoiced in depicting one of those scenes, redolent of atmosphere, that seemed to mark him down as the one worthy successor of Turner. The old houses on the one side and the railings of the river bank on the other fence in the scene, the grouping of the crowd along the Walk and the light wreaths of smoke helping to convey the feeling of infinite stretches of landscape in very small space. In this, as in many of his later water-colours, is to be noticed the charming effects of the sun shining behind buildings. Bonington's sense of the fitness of things, doubtless inspired by his own and his father's love of the theatre, made him always design his compositions and select his colours, not merely to interpret visible facts but to reveal the spirit—romantic, riotous or respectable—that animated the landscape he was painting.

On his return to France Bonington worked for a time in the studio of Delacroix. He was now quite famous. The inevitable trip to Italy followed, during which he made many paintings in oils, though his work in the more feminine medium of water-colours occupied him very seriously. Many of the qualities in his Italian water-colours are those of an excellent journalist. Having very little time during his short visits he produced a series of singularly vivid drawings of the kind that would instantly remind him of his holiday. Bologna made a great impression upon him. The dramatic shadows in the deep and narrow canyons that serve as

streets must have seemed to him like the curtained stage of an opera. The architectural features in *The Leaning Towers, Bologna* [PLATE IV] are carried out with the usual unobtrusive efficiency which allows one to linger over the colour and the design of the drawing as a whole. About a half of the scene is in a shadow the edge of which skirts the bright and animated figures in the street. Blue and white striped window-shades, red tiles on roofs and majestic white clouds are all cheerful notes in the composition and, as in the drawing of the Institut, Paris, the base of the building which requires strengthening—in this case the high tower—rests upon the strong foundation created by the depth of the shadow. The rare colour of the stonework of Italian cities, which has eluded so many great painters, is always exquisitely painted by Bonington's convincing brush. In *The Doge's Palace, Venice* [PLATE V] as in the Bologna drawing, the vivid costumes of the inhabitants are introduced with masterly skill, the sparkling emerald green figure on the right adding to the general effect of brilliancy by its ringing note. The glowing pink walls of the palace are in warm contrast with the cool stonework of the bridge and quayside beneath, the strong and grateful blue of the canal waters giving stability to the graceful situation. Students who give careful thought to the details of this lyrical drawing will be richly repaid. The slightly dulled crimson covering of the barge in the foreground and the position of the masts on the left—filling the space where the down-stepping roofs end close by the pillared lion of St. Mark—have been wrought into the composition in the general interests of harmony and dignity. *The Church of Sant' Ambrogio, Milan* [PLATE VI] shows Bonington in more solemn mood. By placing himself so near the arches, the artist has contrived to give a wide, sweeping dignity to the very dark scene. The touches of body-colour which he occasionally employed are used in this drawing for the high lights on the altar rails and on the reflection at the top of the altar above which there is a pleasing passage of soft illumination. In the foreground the kneeling figures, notably that of the woman in her neat white bonnet, give a familiarly human touch to a scene made awe-inspiring by the presence of the calm-robed choristers.

That Bonington was a master of many styles will be realized by comparing two of his coast scenes. In *Fishing Boats* (also known as *A Dead Calm*) [PLATE VII] the spacious triangular composition is almost a monochrome. The only touches of colour are the long crimson pennant that hangs from the chief vessel and the bright tunic of the man in the stern. All else is in a single subdued tone that now seems a pale brown and now a quiet blue-gray, the lucid reflection in the still water being like the seal of a day's unruffled serenity. Compare this brooding quietness with the brilliance of *Sunset in the Pays de Caux* [PLATE VIII] in which

the shining transparence of the pebbled pools in the foreground reflects the flood of sky-radiance. All this is finely emphasised by the shadow from the cliff, the shadow itself being relieved by the sail of a fishing boat. The clear note of blue from the woman's dress in the foreground and even the black-and-white pattern of the dog in the corner play their part in drawing the attention towards the infinitely subtle gradations of light with which the whole scene is suffused. This gladdening miracle of sunlit atmosphere is one of the treasures of the Wallace Collection which is specially rich in Bonington's water-colours.

During the last year of his life Bonington occupied a studio in the Rue St. Lazare, Paris, where he lived in a comfort that approached luxury. Overwork, however, had its inevitable result. His health began to suffer. Yet his ambitions, great as they were, at no time prevailed against his modesty. Although he was exhibiting once again in England he felt he had yet to win the position at which he aimed and he declined to use a letter of introduction to Sir Thomas Lawrence, the President of the Royal Academy, because he felt he was not yet worthy to meet such a great man. A little while afterwards, on being pressed to make the acquaintance of Lawrence, he did so and was received with much cordiality as a distinguished painter.

It is little wonder that Bonington's life was cut so short. In the brief space of seven or eight years he produced scores of exquisite works of rare quality as well as large numbers of illustrations and of lithographs. When, therefore, he was suddenly laid low by sunstroke his constitution was lacking in recuperative power and he died in London, after a very rapid decline, on September 23, 1828. One of the most sensitive and delicate colourists who ever lived, Richard Parkes Bonington was also in the front rank of draughtsmen. That a man with such an extremely fresh and modern outlook should have died at such an early age is one of the greatest tragedies in the history of art.

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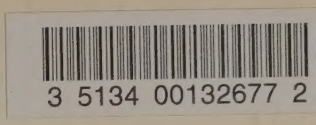
Bonington, Richard Parkes,
1801-1828.
Richard Parkes Bonington



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